

Still Waiting for Equality in Schools

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Twenty years after the landmark Sheff v. O'Neill school-desegregation lawsuit, Hartford has 21 magnet schools and a moderate, voluntary exchange of pupils crossing borders with the suburbs.

New Haven's children are still outperforming Hartford's. Then there's Bridgeport, whose student population was 86 percent black and Hispanic in 1989, when Milo Sheff was 10. That was the year that Milo and his mother, Elizabeth Horton-Sheff, joined other Hartford parents and community leaders who could no longer tolerate separate-and-unequal educational opportunities in a school population that was 91 percent minority.

Milo's 30 now, has three kids of his own and is a music producer.

Today, as Hartford celebrates some of the successes of Sheff v. O'Neill, Bridgeport's schools are 91 percent black and Latino. Danbury is 48.1 percent minority; Norwalk's schools 59.1; Stamford 58.9 percent, according to the latest statistics, which are two years old.

So why doesn't someone in Bridgeport file a Sheff-style lawsuit? Sounds like a good idea to me. Part of the problem may be timing. There's a case called Carroll-Hall v. Rell that's pending before the state Supreme Court on equity funding for Connecticut schools. Another obstacle is money. In Bridgeport, where it's tough just to survive in this economy, who has a spare thousand bucks to pool together for an expensive, multiyear fight to force the cooperation of the suburbs?

John Brittain, one of the lead attorneys in the Sheff case, was up in the Capitol last week celebrating the 20th anniversary of the case, so I asked him how long will it take for New Haven and Bridgeport to catch up with whatever success Hartford may claim in reducing racial disparity in its schools. Brittain, who is now general counsel of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, said way back when, the legal team planned to file a class-action case on behalf of the three big cities. "We thought we could bring an action in Bridgeport, New Haven and Hartford and over the years, you could add Waterbury, Norwalk and New London and many of the others of what the state used to call their special, distressed districts," Brittain replied to a question I asked at a news conference last week.

He recalled that for case-management and funding purposes, they focused on the Hartford region. I asked Brittain if it's taken this long to report modest gains in Hartford, how long would it take Bridgeport and New Haven to catch up. "We originally created this Connecticut Coalition for Educational Equity that had representatives of those three largest cities, but there are many more now that do face the question of racial and ethnic isolation and the need for equal-education-type remedies that we have here in Hartford," he said.

The current desegregation settlement for Hartford has a 2013 deadline to meet further goals and Brittain hopes that by then, the state will extend the full reach of Sheff to include Bridgeport and New Haven. Technically, he said, Sheff already applies to the whole state.

I asked Brittain whether parents in Bridgeport should file their own lawsuit right now. "Yes, we could tomorrow file suits in Bridgeport and New Haven and the rest and simply cite the precedent of the Sheff case and ask for remedy, too," he said. "It really depends upon the commitment of the Legislature to support this kind of action." So, I asked again, how long will it take for Bridgeport and New Haven to catch up? "We would need, all over again -- the way we started here in Hartford -- first and foremost the commitment of the community," he said. "It wasn't a lawyer suit. It was a people suit, and we just have to

wait 'til we find the people who have that kind of steadfast dedication. I'd never seen, in my 40 years of civil rights litigation, a group of parents, as well as tremendous supporters behind them, stick this long in a school-desegregation case." He said Elizabeth Horton-Sheff is nearly an archetype of the community activist, who knew that her lawsuit would never really change the education infrastructure in which Milo would grow up.

"I used the Steven Spielberg and Spike Lee casting to go out and find the strongest and most dedicated persons and we were highly successful in that effort," Brittain said. "We need those in Bridgeport and New Haven, too."

Rep. Andy Fleischmann, D-West Hartford, co-chairman of the Legislature's joint Education Committee, said that no region has more magnet schools than New Haven, which has better academic results than Hartford. "Hartford is actually trying to catch up with New Haven," Fleischmann said. "Bridgeport, unfortunately, though it had the same opportunities, did not avail themselves of the opportunities as well," he said. "I do think it is appropriate for parents in Bridgeport to be asking why, and for folks in the Bridgeport region to be saying, what can we do in organizing ourselves the way that New Haven and Hartford did, to make sure we're maximizing what we can get out of the state?"

Martha Stone, founder of the Center for Children's Advocacy and another veteran of the desegregation wars, said the other day that parents shouldn't be complacent. "If I were a Bridgeport parent I would explore all options," she said when I asked if they should organize and sue the state in a 2009 version of Sheff. She says it's clear that Bridgeport has facility problems and is racially and economically isolated. "Bridgeport kids should have the same rights they have in Hartford," she said. "The constitutional right to equal educational opportunity is not geographic." She said that Bridgeport should be eligible for federal stimulus funding that can at least help the city's special-education programs.

I called Bridgeport Mayor Bill Finch, who teed off. "We're on our fourth lawsuit as to the constitutionality of our school systems," he said in a phone interview, noting the pending case before the state Supreme Court. "I don't think the Supreme Court can be counted on to give our poor children equity." The big obstacle, of course, is how to fund a desegregation program that can attract students from outside the city. It gets us back to the property-tax crisis in the state. "You cannot fund children's education based on the value of real estate in a tiny city like Bridgeport," he said.

"We need greater accountability on how education dollars can be spent," Finch said. "We are spending large amounts of money. We're moving toward greater transparency. If you look at the terrain, anyone in my shoes would push for school choice; empower parents toward self-determination. When you go to our schools and look into the eyes of our children, politics melts away. They're counting on us to be fair to them." Finch said his recent support for school choice and getting more city kids into private and parochial schools is a far cry from his opinion about the issue three years ago.

"I've evolved because of what I've seen," he said. "I've seen success in public, private and parochial. I think that since Sheff v. O'Neill, the situation in Bridgeport, New Haven and other cities hasn't gotten better. It's gotten worse." Poverty, crime and ignorance remain the three-headed monster blocking the path to better educational opportunities. "If we can end the cycle of poverty "!" he said, not finishing the sentence. "We have the means; we just need to have the will." What Bridgeport, New Haven and other troubled school districts need are a few good, angry parents.

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